

NEW BIRD RECORDS IN SRI LANKA AND SOME CONNECTED MATTERS

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INTRODUCTION

I am very happy to be able to contribute this paper to the Sálím Ali Centenary issue of the JBNHS. I had corresponded with Dr. Sálím Ali over a period of years and met him on several occasions, notably during the BNHS Centenary celebrations in Bombay and the 50th Anniversary Seminar of the Periyar Tiger Reserve in 1985. I used to address him as Dr. Ali or Dr. Sálím Ali, with the emphasis on the "A", in contrast to "Salimalee" (emphasis on last syllable) as then pronounced by many Indians. On one occasion at Periyar, he said to a group of students and admirers who surrounded him: "Listen how Mr. Hoffmann, a Swiss from Sri Lanka, pronounces my name. This is the proper way". I invited him to Sri Lanka but he declined, saying that he could not yet forget the hostile and humiliating treatment meted out to him and Dillon Ripley on their last visit to the island. On that occasion in the mid-1970s the two eminent ornithologists were virtually chased out of Sri Lanka due to inept handling by the US Embassy of their scientific expedition which included collecting, and the chauvinist zeal of a few Lankan conservationists. The Ceylon Bird Club had not been informed of the visit, was indeed unaware of it, and thus unable to help. Sálím Ali never returned to Sri Lanka, undoubtedly a setback for the scientific study of the island's birds.

Nearly 10 years ago, I prepared an update on Sri Lankan Birds (to the end of 1986) and notes on changes in status and distribution compared with Ripley's SYNOPSIS (1982) and Ali and Ripley's HANDBOOK (1968 - 1974); the paper was published in the *Journal* 1986 (1) : 7 - 16. Strangely, there were a number of inexplicable printing errors, e.g. the word vagrant was replaced by migrant in several

instances. This was followed by another paper in the same JBNHS [88 (3) : 381 - 383] giving additional details of the 16 accepted sight records which were included in the first contribution. The present paper continues the process up to the end of 1995 in respect of new species and races discovered in the interim.

The Ceylon Bird Club (CBC) which was founded in January 1944, has a unique collection of data on Sri Lankan birds in the form of its monthly Bird Club Notes (CBCN). These notes were extensively used by Ali and Ripley in their works mentioned above. I have been the Honorary Editor of the CBCN since 1970 to date. Ten years ago, the CBC appointed a Rarities Committee which scrutinized and assessed all doubtful records at that time, and since then reviews and judges carefully and objectively all claims which come to its notice. As pointed out earlier (Hoffmann 1991) it would be unreasonable and unrealistic not to accept good sight records in a country where the collection of specimens is now practically impossible; stragglers and vagrants form the majority of new records wherefore serious bird-watchers would have to permanently carry a gun ! Acceptance of well documented sight records is thus in keeping with reality and the trends of the time, but requires very careful observation and note-taking in the field, as well as subsequent scrutiny of all relevant data. To some extent it also is a matter of trust, and controversies cannot be excluded. All of the 22 new records listed in this paper are sight records. For taxonomic reasons specimens will always be required but not for mere recording. Selective collecting by responsible ornithologists cannot be objected to or replaced by other methods such as mist netting (which may in fact be more stressful and damaging to bird populations).

The number of new species and races recorded in recent years in Sri Lanka is quite impressive.

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During the first half of the century this number was almost static, then increased very slowly at long intervals, but since the 1980s, new records average over two per year. Practically all pertain to migrants, of course. Henry (1955) describes 403 species and subspecies, Phillips (1978) lists 427 and Wijesinghe (1994) 463 (plus 14 doubtful). Three more have since been accepted, bringing the total number of forms to 466 at the end of 1995. The recent spate may partly be due to changes in migrating patterns and of environmental factors in neighbouring India, but are mainly the result of wider interest in birds, with more bird-watchers in Sri Lanka and the frequent presence in the country of foreign bird-watching groups and individuals. The groups are usually led by very experienced bird specialists and reputed ornithologists from abroad who guarantee intensive bird-watching of a high calibre. The few local specialist guides greatly profit from such tours and become our most reliable recorders.

LITERATURE

Bird-watchers in Sri Lanka often find it difficult to procure appropriate literature. During the last 40 years G. M. Henry's splendidly written and illustrated Guide to the Birds of Ceylon (1955) has been the only comprehensive source of information but has often been unavailable. The book is again out of print but a completely revised and updated edition will come out in 1997. This classic together with W. W. A. Phillips' *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ceylon* (1978) and D.P. Wijesinghe's *Checklist of the Birds of Sri Lanka* (1994) forms the basis of all current knowledge of Sri Lankan birds. W. Vincent Legge's fine *History of the Birds of Ceylon* (1880) has long been out of print, and even the four volume reprint (1983) is neither affordable nor really useful to the modern field ornithologist. Long out of print have been the more popular works by W.E. Wait (1925), Cicely Lushington (1949) and the four small volumes by W.W.A. Phillips (1949 - 1961). Ali and Ripley's *HANDBOOK* depends mostly on Henry and Phillips' Checklist (with Wait and Legge) for information

about Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Ripley's *SYNOPSIS* on Phillips' Checklist.

NEW RECORDS 1986 - 1995

The following list of new species recorded and accepted in Sri Lanka from 1986 - 1995 relies on D. P. Wijesinghe (1994) in regard to nomenclature. Numbers in brackets are those used in the *HANDBOOK* and in the *SYNOPSIS*; birds not listed in either are marked thus (-).

1. Barau's Petrel, *Pterodroma barau* (-)
First sighted in 1991 (CBCN May 1993 : 48, 49).
A rare though possibly regular visitor to Sri Lankan coastal waters.
2. Bulwer's Petrel, *Bulweria bulwerii* (13b)
Seen 1994 off Colombo (CBCN April 1995 : 32).
3. Audubon's Shearwater, *Puffinus lherminieri* (11)
First sight record in 1982 and another in 1994 (CBCN July 1994 : 86).
4. Chinese Pond Heron, *Ardeola bacchus* (43)
First seen and photographed in unmistakable breeding plumage, April 1995 near Tissamaharama (CBCN April 1995 : 33 and May 1995: 40).
5. Lesser Kestrel, *Falco naumanni* (221)
First seen 1995 at Palatupana (Yala) (CBCN April 1995 : 35), possibly overlooked.
6. Small Button Quail, *Turnix sylvatica* (313)
One sight record from Yala National Park 1978 (CBCN February 1978 : 7), possibly escapee (thus not mentioned in Hoffmann, 1989).
7. Oriental Plover, *Charadrius veredus* (377)
Sight record 1994 south-east coast (CBCN January 1994: 7).
The *HANDBOOK* and Ripley treat the Oriental Plover as a subspecies (*veredus*) of the Sand Plover, *Charadrius asiaticus*.
8. Nordmann's Greenshank, *Tringa guttifer* (399)
One 1991 sight record from Hevativu, south

- of Palavi (Puttalam), in need of confirmation (*Loris* 1992 : 195, 196).
9. Sooty Gull, *Larus hemprichii* (449)
First sight record January 1993 at Mutwal (Colombo) (CBCN January 1993 : 16 - 17), and 2 birds seen at Chilaw, also in January 1993.
 10. Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans* (450, 451)
There is much confusion in the world literature about the taxonomy of the two large gulls, *Larus fuscus* and *Larus argentatus*, and their numerous geographical races. Individuals of *L. cachinnans* (subspecies : *L.c. cachinnans* and *L.c. mongolicus*), formerly treated as a subspecies of *L. argentatus*, occur in winter along the N-W coast of Sri Lanka, sometimes amongst flocks of *Larus fuscus heuglini*. As the colour of the legs is not a reliable diagnostic feature, a better name would be White-headed Gull, because even in winter the overall appearance of the head is white. *L.f. heuglini* is nowadays increasingly treated as a full species, *Larus heuglini*, Heuglin's Gull.
 11. Black-naped Tern, *Sterna sumatrana* (468, 469)
Sight record 1994 some miles off western coast (CBCN April 1995 : 32). Subspecies unknown.
 12. Black Tern, *Chlidonias niger* (459a)
Three recent sight records 1992, 1993 (*Loris* 1992 : 204 - 205) and 1995 (CBCN April 1995 : 38). The HANDBOOK mentions only one old sight record in respect of the entire Indian Sub-continent. In the meantime the Black Tern has been repeatedly noted and ringed at Point Calimere (JBNHS 1994 : 317).
 13. Black Noddy, *Anous minutus* (-)
A specimen misidentified as the Lesser Noddy in 1978 (*Loris* 1993 : 44 - 48). Occasional visitor to coasts mainly during S-W Monsoon.
 14. European Bee-eater, *Merops apiaster* (746)
First seen in 1993 at Yala (CBCN February 1993 : 23) and subsequently every winter.
 15. Dusky Crag Martin, *Ptyonoprogne concolor* (914)
First seen 1993 near Colombo (CBCN January 1993 : 14).
 16. Eye-browed Thrush, *Turdus obscurus* (1762)
Seen at Nuwara Eliya January to March 1994 (CBCN June 1994 : 73 - 75).
 17. Lanceolated Warbler, *Locustella locustella* (1544)
Only one sight record (CBCN December 1991 : 72), but may be overlooked.
 18. Common Grasshopper Warbler, *Locustella naevia* (1545)
First noted 1993 near Colombo, and annually thereafter (CBCN December 1993 : 107).
 19. Grey-headed Mynah, *Sturnus malabaricus* (988)
Flock seen at Anuradhapura 1984 to 1986 (CBCN January 1984:1). A straggler from S-W India, possibly breeding resident (juveniles in flock 1986). Subspecies not known.
- NEW SUBSPECIES RECORDED AND ACCEPTED DURING THE SAME PERIOD :
20. Large Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii thalassina* (478)
This smallest, palest race was observed during the early months of 1990 at Colombo (CBCN March 1990 : 25a and *Loris* 1991 : 26).
 21. Tytler's Swallow, *Hirundo rustica tytleri* (918)
First seen 1989 and annually thereafter in small numbers (CBCN December 1989 : 71).
 22. White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis* (1888)
First seen 1995 at Kalametiya (CBCN April 1995 : 32).
- THE STATUS OF THE RED FACED MALKOHA
- A note regarding the status of the Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*, as a Sri

Lankan endemic may not be out of place here. I cite from the *HANDBOOK*, Vol. 3 (2nd edition 1981), p. 238: "Resident in Ceylon and South India; rare and local. Was long regarded as peculiar to the island, and reports of its occurrence (and breeding) in Travancore by J. Stewart (in Baker, 1932 -1934) were discredited. However, since then the species has been reliably observed at the foot of High Wavy Mountains in the adjoining Tamil Nadu District of Madurai (C. H. Biddulph, 1956, *JBNHS* 53 : 697 - 8) therefore previous doubts probably unjustified".

Ripley in his *SYNOPSIS* (1982) simply states : "Resident Southern Kerala, Southern Travancore (*JBNHS* 53 : 697 - 8) and Sri Lanka".

A critical look at Biddulph's belated note (1956) on an observation by him in 1931 shows, however, that previous doubts remain more than justified. Paras 5, 6 and 7 read as follows :

"It remained on the tree for a sufficient period of time for me to observe it closely and I made the most of the opportunity, as it was the first occasion on which I had seen a live bird of this species in its natural habitat.

It changed its position on the tree while I watched and made its harsh call three or four times. This call or note has been correctly described by Legge and it was its loud call which first attracted my attention.

The crimson cheek patches were unmistakable and very prominent. I noted its approximate size and shape, colouration, shape of beak and length of the tail in relation to the body".

This is all Biddulph writes about the appearance and habits of the bird he saw, a meagre description which would not pass scrutiny in any rarities committee today. The only specific characteristic he mentions is "the crimson cheek patches". The crimson-red face of this Malkoha can certainly not be described as "cheek patches". According to W.V. Legge (1878 - 80) the crimson area covers the "whole face as far back as the ears passing over the eye and across the base of the upper mandible".

The *HANDBOOK* (1981) says : "Its most

diagnostic features are the bare red face and heavy apple-green bill".

Thus, whilst Biddulph's description of the face of the bird he saw does not tally with that of the Red-faced Malkoha, the rest is so cursory as to be meaningless.

Biddulph is also wrong with regard to the call of the Red-faced Malkoha. He describes it as harsh and loud. All authorities are agreed that it is soft and low, though not often heard, as the bird is usually silent. W.V. Legge, who in the last century had extensive experience of the Red-faced Malkoha which was then plentiful in Sri Lanka says :

"As a rule it is a silent bird, the only note with which I am acquainted being a rather low monosyllable like call like kaa, which it utters when flying about".¹

Henry (1955) states :

"Owing to the short, rounded wings, its flight is feeble, slow and direct and, if it has any distance to cover, it commonly prefers to hop from branch to branch until it reaches the top of a tree, and then to flutter and volplane from that vantage-point; in flight, the wings produce a musical hum. It is usually silent, but I have heard it utter short, single-note, yelping whistles; a note like kok - imitated by a sucking action of the tongue; and a low, petulant-sounding krâ".

Henry's rendering of the calls is cited in the *HANDBOOK*.

Current observers familiar with the Red-faced Malkoha characterize the call as a soft, low "krrr".

Thus the only two significant features which Biddulph mentions in his paper (red cheek patches and call) cannot be accepted as belonging to the Red-faced Malkoha. He has failed to note other typical features such as the heavy apple-green bill, the long, broad graduated tail, the white lower breast, belly and vent, all of which are easily seen, if a good view is had of the bird; even the white flecks on the black nape and crown should have been visible through

¹Legge was familiar with the bird to the extent of having eaten it; he says the flesh "is tender and not unpleasantly flavoured".

binoculars at 10 - 13 m distance. If Biddulph did not have visual aids, his identification becomes even more doubtful. The musical hum produced by the wings in flight (Henry) is also noteworthy, as is the mode of movement and flight (Henry).

It is astonishing that Biddulph's sketchy note about an observation he made 25 years earlier and his confident identification should have been so uncritically accepted not only in India but also by some in Sri Lanka (only after the HANDBOOK had become available there; Biddulph's paper had apparently escaped notice till then).

About 65 years have passed since Biddulph sat on a machan at the foot of the High Wavy Mountains in the Madurai District of Tamil Nadu and thought he heard and saw a Red-faced Malkoha. To my knowledge, no further records of this species from India have been forthcoming, although in the meantime interest in Indian birds has grown like in Sri Lanka, with hundreds if not thousands of bird-watchers and ornithologists, both Indian and foreign, visiting the relevant forests (where still in existence). It would be a tempting goal to confirm the presence of the Red-faced Malkoha there. But the likelihood that C. H. Biddulph's opinion about the existence "in the favourable localities" of Southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu of the Red-faced Malkoha would be confirmed or authenticated appears most remote.

In the last century the Red-faced Malkoha was present in forests all over the Low-country (except in the northern Dry Zone) and common in the eastern and south-eastern jungle and foothills of Sri Lanka. Today it is confined to the few remaining Wet Zone rain forests such as Sinharaja, Dellawa, Kitulgala. Isolated populations exist in the Dry Zone in dense forests mainly along rivers, e.g. in Wasgomuwa National Park, along the Heen Ganga, Kumbukkan Oya, Menik Ganga and at Lahugala.

It has always been the position of the Ceylon Bird Club that the Red-faced Malkoha must remain a Sri Lankan endemic as long as indisputable evidence about its existence in Southern Kerala is lacking, notably a specimen, of course. Thus the latest authoritative Checklist (Wijesinghe 1994)

retains the Red-faced Malkoha as an endemic of Sri Lanka, together with the other 20 species recognised in the HANDBOOK and the SYNOPSIS, and also the following five clearly distinct forms, making now a total of 26 :

- The Ceylon Grey Hornbill
Ocyceros gingalensis
- The Chestnut-backed Owlet
Glaucidium castanonotum
- The Ceylon Small Barbet
Megalaima rubricapilla
- The Black-capped Bulbul
Pycnonotus melanicterus
- The Ceylon Hill Munia
Lonchura kelaarti

CONSERVATION IN SRI LANKA

The protection and conservation of birds and their habitats receives little attention in Sri Lanka, though on paper all birds, except 6 species considered to be pests, are strictly protected and cannot be killed or taken anywhere in the island. Good habitat protection could be achieved through the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance under which an impressive number of National Parks and Sanctuaries has been declared over the years. However, the implementation and enforcement of this and other conservation laws leaves much to be desired. Shooting, trapping and other destruction of birds is unchecked since the late 1950's and the degradation and even elimination of bird habitats continues. Though a few sanctuaries have been specifically created for birds, bird habitat protection is purely incidental in the larger national parks. Sanctuaries in general are neglected and unprotected. Vast tracts of valuable habitats have been lost in recent years not only to felling and clearing but to aquaculture farms which proliferate without control in wetlands along the coasts. Some hope for improvement may lie in the Dutch funded and managed Wetland Conservation Project (WCP), which so far, however, has merely gathered data and made recommendations which remain unimplemented. The highly important

wet zone forests which harbour most of our endemics have dwindled to almost negligible proportions, except for the Sinharaja forest, now a World Heritage Site and well protected by the Forest Department. But despite lip service by decision makers and fairly widespread public awareness, the outlook for practical conservation in general, of wildlife and birds in particular, is bleak, as both the Government and the Administration lack the will to act. Unenforced laws are worse than no laws, inviting general contempt. In the matter of conservation there is no coordination between Government agencies; an example is the dry Hambantota area where close to and in the Bundala National Park, Sri Lanka's only Ramsar Site, a massive international oil refinery and power plant, a wind-power farm, salt-based industries and a 1000 acre prawn farm are being planned!

Because of neglect some important specific bird Sanctuaries have suffered severe degradation, for instance the small Galways Land Sanctuary at Nuwara Eliya, the Tangamalai Sanctuary above Haputale and the Kalametiya wetland Sanctuary, also the new Bundala National Park. The most important of all, the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary, with the greatest number of endemic forms, has never received the attention it deserves; we have repeatedly proposed that it should be enlarged to include the lower elevations near Kitulgala from 70 m a. s. l. upward (to over 2200 m) and be joined to the Horton

Plains National Park. But even in National Parks, habitat protection is very unsatisfactory. All conservation areas north of a line from Puttalam in the west to Valaichchenai in the east and further south along the east coast are abandoned and suffer actual and grave depredation due to military activities and exploitation, notably Wilpattu, Sri Lanka's formerly most attractive National Park, as well as the Yala East National Park. The presence in the country (Colombo !) of handfuls of foreign experts, NGOs, International organisations and even Government Agencies, all trying hard to influence policies, has not helped. On the contrary, it has alienated and displaced local NGOs and the much vaunted "people's" participation does not even extend to these any more. In a strange alliance of self-interest and convenience with local bureaucrats, it is mainly these foreigners who have successfully argued against effective law enforcement, the easy way out for all concerned. The mandatory EIAs, of great importance in the conservation of habitats, have degenerated to a farce with mushrooming consultancy firms depending solely on the developers for the jobs and their profits. The outlook remains indeed bleak.

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